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Testimony to the Planning & Development Committee

**Raised Bill 6464, An Act Concerning Coordinated Preservation  
and Development**

March 2, 2009

*The South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority is a non-profit, public corporation and political subdivision of the State. Within the 20 member towns of our water district, we own and operate a public water system, which includes 18 reservoirs, 4 surface water treatment plants and 7 ground water treatment plants. We serve over 427,000 water consumers approximately 53 million gallons of water per day and provide fire protection throughout our service area. The source of this water is a system of watershed and aquifer areas that cover about 120 square miles within 24 municipalities. Over 27,000 acres of these watershed and aquifer areas are protected as open space as a result of the Authority's efforts while an additional 900 acres are protected with a conservation easement.*

The Regional Water Authority would like to thank the Planning and Development Committee for the opportunity to provide comments on Raised Bill 6464, *An Act Concerning Coordinated Preservation and Development*. The Regional Water Authority supports the intent of Raised Bill 6464, but believes the additional layer of approval required for all projects under this legislation may not be necessary given existing processes that are in place.

CGS Section 7-131e, Subsection (b), already contains a requirement for a Natural Heritage, Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Review Board, comprised of appointed diverse participants. This Board has been working very effectively for more than ten years in reviewing applications for the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program, administered by the Department of Environmental Protection. It provides recommendations for the Commissioner of Environmental Protection to consider before making any awards. The DEP grants have been awarded for open space and watershed land acquired by municipalities, land conservation groups and water companies using a ranking system for consistency and equity that follows very specific criteria, many of which are consistent with smart growth principles, established in CGS Section 7-131e, Subsection (a). We do not believe this process needs to change by adding another layer of review, which could cause undue delays in the purchase of prime open space or watershed protection land. However, if the Committee believes it necessary to add smart growth principles to the criteria noted above, the Regional Water Authority would be pleased to help the Committee develop specific language.

The intent for creating the Face of Connecticut Steering Committee during the 2008 session was to fill gaps that exist with necessary new programs to preserve our state's character as well as to manage and distribute funds for multi-purpose projects of special significance. Existing programs that preserve and protect Connecticut's natural resources would continue to exist. The Regional Water Authority still believes this should be the case.

The Face of Connecticut defines the character of our communities and our quality of life. Connecticut's quality of life is enriched by the quality of the water we drink and the resources we have to provide a safe environment through fire protection.

The Open Space and Watershed Acquisition Grant Program provides a valuable resource to the residents of the state by funding municipal, land conservation group and water utility purchases of open space and watershed lands. We realize these are extremely difficult times for the state, as well as the nation, as we try to come to terms with the decline in our economy. There are significant decisions the legislature and Governor will have to make to balance the budget and to mitigate the increasing deficit. Often this leads to eliminating programs that are really working, providing a significant benefit to the residents of the state and its economy and cannot be made up for in the future if curtailed. This would be the case in not funding the Open Space and Watershed Acquisition Grant Program. As we have learned, once land is sold for development, it is gone forever; it would be shortsighted to curtail this program and allow precious open space to be unnecessarily developed.

Even during troubling economic times -- and perhaps even more so during these times -- owners of undeveloped land will be trying to sell their land as a way to make up for lost income or savings. As soon as banks start funding, developers will be purchasing. Connecticut must make sure it positions itself now to ensure that Connecticut is the place that businesses want to grow and people want to live by continuing its funding of open space and watershed lands as they become available. An added benefit of funding open space is that in many cases it serves as an additional protection to water supplies from becoming contaminated.

The Regional Water Authority takes its stewardship of land very seriously. Our Land Use Plan guides us in the management of our landholdings so that we successfully implement a multi-barrier approach to ensure high quality drinking water quality while protecting open space.

Land choice is an important decision confronting many towns across our 20-town region. What happens on land in terms of development can affect the quality of water supplies. Two years ago, the Authority announced its plans to purchase and protect some 3,000 acres of watershed land in the region for protection of the public drinking water supply. Last week it bought its 14<sup>th</sup> parcel of land since announcing the land initiative. Conservation easements protect four other parcels. All the parcels are in the watersheds or aquifers of the Authority's existing or future supplies in the following communities: Bethany, Branford, Cheshire, Durham, East Haven, Guilford, Haddam, Hamden, Killingworth, Madison, North Branford and Woodbridge. These acquisitions were made possible because of grants from the State, partnerships with municipalities and land conservation groups, and grants from The Watershed Fund, as well as funds from our budget that is supported by the rates paid by our water customers.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our comments on Raised Bill 6464. The Regional Water Authority looks forward to working with legislators and the Executive Branch to assure that the Face of Connecticut Steering Committee is retained and that authorized bonding for the 2009-11 biennial budget is maintained at the FY2008-09 level. To eliminate the Steering Committee now, when it is all volunteered time and no expense to the state, would be short sighted.